

A WRY LOOK AT PALINDROMIC VERSE

J. A. LINDON

Weybridge, Surrey, England

Ties us all alive -- dotties! Oppose it.
To Devil all as use it!

What value has the idea of formal reversal in poetry? My immediate inclination is to say 'precious little', with the accent on the 'little' rather than the 'precious'; and I suspect, too, that this may well prove my final estimate. Consider the parallel between music and poetry. Short-term reversals occur in both, e.g. the assertive "I will" and the questioning "Will I?", the full-close and the half-close; but, apart from certain minor applications in fugal writing and a good deal of (dare I say it?) misuse by our contemporary twelve-tone ear-sores, the cancrizans mode is as conspicuous by its absence from music as it is from poetry. Yet the vast body of music as we know it would almost cease to exist if another formal device, namely imitation, were to vanish. Why is this? I think the answer is simple. With phrase A still echoing in the memory as phrase B is sounding in the ear, the mind perceives imitation directly. But a reversed theme does not generally recall the original, so this device is unnatural, artificial, forced. If you have doubts, get someone to play for you a snatch of recorded music backwards on the gramophone, and see if you can at once identify it. To revert to poetry: slip in, among some more normal poems you are reading aloud, one that is palindromic, and your hearer will probably notice only the absurdities, the contortions, the infelicities of the writing; and if you point out irritably "But it is a palindromic poem!" will be apt to reply "Then it would be better if it weren't!"

Is this condemnation all? Has PD verse nothing to recommend it? I suggest tentatively that it has two things, at least, in its favour. Firstly, repetition of sound (rhyme, assonance, alliteration, refrain, etc.) is of the very essence of poetry, and such sound repetition is automatically introduced by reversal technique. But repetitions must occur fairly closely together if the ear is to perceive them, so I suggest that perhaps the poem should be composed of line-PDs, rather than be palindromic from end to end, if the device is to be effective. Secondly, by steering the writer away from everyday ideas into quite uncharted regions, reversal technique forces him to create something new, or at least try to do so, out of the odd materials and unlikely juxtapositions it turns up for him. PDs discover the inherent surrealism of retrograde spelling, and present it in agreeably alliterative form.

Anne, varnish Tom's moths in Ravenna!

Who ever would have thought of saying a thing like that, if it hadn't gracefully presented itself?

But enough preamble. Time we got on with our examples. To begin with, here is a very simple idea, written in half-rhymed line-PDs and using free rhythms.

Seven Eves

Seven Eves,
No girl-rig on.
Seville. Babel lives.
Never one senor even.

"Sir, I'm Iris."
"Ann." "I'm Minna."
Sick calm-lack Cis,
Anile Selina.

'Gems it is' Meg,
A nude red Una
('Garb not on' brag) --
An aid, O Diana!

Peel solo, sleep . . .
Evil, all alive!
Partner, Eves ever entrap --
Ever one tenor, Eve!

Now that stuck to the point pretty well. (Pure Venuses, O Rose, Sun Ever Up!) But why bother to impose a theme? Why not simply let the poem find itself? In the extravaganza that follows, the keyword vendetta introduces, by devious means, its own naturally associated subjects of gypsies and volcanoes; all I have done, in writing it, is keep within the scope of such material.

(Due for agnized ode) - Zingaro Feud

Sure, vendetta fattened never us
On a cloven-O-cone volcano.
Salad amid rain -- O poniard (I mad, alas!)
On a tight or wroth gitano!

Woven as Nina's duds, an insane vow --
No-tire-patrol-like we kill, or taper it on . . .
Won, I lob morts, pull odd doll up Stromboli now --
No lava, nil, a gala gal in Avalon.

Spit, play molten rock comet -- lo, my Alp tips!
On (ire-peptonised, nag) Andes I, not peperino.
Speed ne'er, Gypsy (Rome memory), spy green deeps
On all snug anodi hid on a gun's llano.

On, O Mike, lap anisado sodas in a pale kimono
On a tiger -- a reborn-in-robe rare gitano!

"It is a little difficult to understand," said Alice hesitantly.
"Somebody is doing something, and mountains come into it, that's certain, and I think there's a moral somewhere, but I'm sure I don't know what it is." The truth is, the subject was too difficult for any real success. It will be noticed that the need to rhyme, when line-PDs are used, automatically involves repeated line-beginnings. Let us make a virtue of necessity and, by emphasizing this, use it.

Ned's Madams' Den

Anne, varnish Tom's moths in Ravenna!
Nora, my cast-up puts a cymar on!
Anne, he got Sal, alas, to Gehenna!
Nora, Basil -- Rae's 'earl' -- is a baron!

Cis, Sal called "Pull-up Dell" a classic!
Odile -- Beryl? Mumly rebel I do!
Cis, umpires (I arm raise) rip music!
Odile to hot, pop to hotel I do!

Olive, do not die -- I'd to no Devil-O!
Nita, bad Ella (coo!) called a bat in!
Olive, sin -- airy Syrian -- is evil-O!
Nita sews . . . Reward: dud drawers we sat in!

Sue, tip sedate Meta despite us!
Anne I vote no go -- gone to Vienna!
Sue, Tib'll nip up in, 'll bite us!
Anne, varnish Tom's moths in Ravenna!

It should perhaps be pointed out that some, at least, of the monotony of similar line-beginnings can be obliterated by such devices as splitting a long line into two parts, as in

Was it a foot, Sal, a wapiti paw
(Alas, too fat!) I saw?
Did I spay a pom? Sad, I hid, I hid --
As Mopa yaps, I did!

The vet had been tight all day, but even so he ought to have remembered that wapitis have hooves, not paws! (Or do they?) Let us now try an end-to-end PD poem and see what the result is like.

Esne's Nonsense

Anne is warm if I save era's Emil
No lemonade Eva gave Harris
Anne, I voted artel is abnormal
No, lass, dine -- Marc did. (Fled to Paris!)
Tim Egerton paws mirror, Rena

"Anita, no sonnets!" I limit
 Tim, I listen . . . No sonatina
 An error -- rim swap, not re-gem it
 Sir, a pot (delf) did cram Enid's salon
 Lam Ron, Basile! (Trade to Vienna.)
 Sirrah, Eva gave Eda no melon
 Limes are Eva's if I'm raw sienna.

The above agreeably sounding nonsense may be compared with the following, which I tried to keep sensible; but it fails, I think, because the result simply doesn't sound like poetry.

Nets III? Listen!

Refasten
 Nets. (A hot nip?
 Ward rock, sir!)
 Nets aft now
 We fasten.
 Lee not safe.
 Rotten net to
 Refasten.
 Eel nets? A few
 Won't fasten.
 (Risk cord raw --
 Pin to hasten!)
 Net safer.

I prefer nonsense, it's the maniac in me. Let us try an end-to-end PD sonnet, shall we?

Dames Pale Lapse Mad

An era's mood, a dud, a doom's arena
 Anita vacates lot, sips anon Asti
 Pug, I dig -- no song, nor a sonatina
 Anon a gulp -- a dago, he wolfs pasti

Pug, Iris pets no deer, but nabs a llama
 An "Omo" pot (not new), a vat to fit on
 No, 'tis, O Ted -- ah, sadness! -- impure Kama
 A maker-up, Miss. End? A shade to sit on

"Not if," Ottava went on to Pomona
 (A mall, as Bantu breed on steps I rig up)
 "It saps flow, eh?" O gad! A plug, Anona!
 Anita -- no sarong, no song -- I dig up!

It's Anona's pistol, set a cavatina --
 An era's mood, a dud, a doom's arena!

This starts and ends with a PD line, but that is not necessary: I put it in merely to round off the thing. But we need to realise that in

such an end-to-end PD sonnet we cannot reshuffle the lines afterwards, as we certainly can in one using line-PDs; if we attempt to do so, we interfere with either the end-to-end PD condition or the strict rhyme scheme. So, for my last example, I give another sonnet, this time using line-PDs. I choose a French rhyme scheme in which the couplet immediately follows the octave, so as to keep all my ten noses together -- the whole snushy blowing, in fact!

Ten Noses Use Sonnet

Nose I tag loosely, Ryle, so Olga ties on
 Nose mannish (Tom's) -- aha! has moths in, names on
 Nose malfait, a slap-up Alsatia flames on
 Nose ye peek tacit, iritic, at, keep eyes on
 Nose rifle, Bertie, of foot-rebel fires on
 Nose -- dart a nib or eye -- Robina trades on
 Nose daft, sewn-on, late petal (non-West) fades on
 Nose -- rips at angel silk -- Lisle gnat aspires on
 Nose -- ogre dips same, Em, as spider goes on
 Nose of Delft nag a wee wag ant fled foes on --

O sniff in, Selim, stab at smile, sniff in so!
 Esus, I made us sit tissued, a misuse!
 O snirtle! Flirt, son! HSOSH!!! (Nostril felt "Rinso" !)
 So, oh, sit all (eyes run, Nurse), yell atishoos!

A word to those who feel dissatisfaction with so much nonsense. To write a PD that shall scan, agree in length and rhyme with a given example is so difficult that to add the further condition of continuity of sense renders the task hopeless. The writer's choice appears to lie between free verse with sense continuity, and rhymed nonsense. However, examples may prove me wrong. And now -- like my ten noses -- I will blow.